MacDougall (1998) The Subjective Voice in Ethnographic Film

There is a struggle between the approach of ethnographic film; either one should be involved with the natives or just an observer. MacDougall though, is trying to explain the potentially perfect fit of a subjective perspective. MacDougall explains that sometimes the “experiences [of the filmmaker]…were useful only as illustrations” (MacDougall: 94), in the creation of simplifications/stereotypes as a result of subjective descriptions by individuals moving toward “the composite, and eventually the comparison and classification of composites” (MacDougall: 94). This to me meant that putting yourself within the “shoes” of the subject and getting lost within their culture isn’t quite enough to showcase said culture to an outside audience.

“Representing the subjectivity of the historical character is a very different matter from attributing subjectivity to a fictional character” (MacDougall: 2). MacDougall jumps around a lot with what the subjective voice is and its purpose, through different perspectives of film. Ultimately I gathered that there were multiple subjectivities at work with each other (in communal and contrasting forms). These perspectives come from the audience viewing the film and that of the filmmaker who created the film the audience views, as well as the subject matter.

The examples he uses to express the different forms in which the subjective voice can be seen are exterior, interior and descriptive dramatization, psychodrama, cultural re-expression, ethnobiography, observation, interview, interchange and the subjective camera. The best approaches of the subjective voice I believe, is the involvement of the subject, person or culture being studied as much as possible. I believe it enables them to be reflective of their culture and will help the filmmaker see what they believe is most important about them and/or their culture. good job with a complex argument